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History as Tragic Myth in Todos los gatos son pardos

Willard Gingerich

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NARRATIVA

HISPANOAMERICANA

Interpretaciones a la obra de

CARLOS FUENTES

UN GIGANTE DE
LAS LETRAS
HISPANO-
AMERICANAS



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History as Tragic Myth in Todos los gatos son pardos

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Carlos Fuentes' long dramatic epic, *Todos los gatos son pardos* «All Cats Are Grey» (*TLGSP*), was written in 1970, based on the events of Cortés' early 16th century conquest of the Aztec empire. It is one of several major works produced by Mexican intellectuals in the wake of the tragic events of October 2, 1968, in the Plaza of Three Cultures at Tlatelolco in Mexico City when Mexican police and para-military forces opened fire on a large public demonstration, with consequences that still reverberate in Mexican political life. *TLGSP* shares with the still controversial essay by Octavio Paz, *Posdata*, a number of themes, images and interpretations of Mexican history, among the most prominent of which is the conviction that the characters, events and memories of pre-Columbian society and the trauma of the 16th century conquest still hold important keys for understanding the dynamics of modern Mexican political and social orders. In fact, *TLGSP* is clearly a dramatic «ritual» in which the story of the conquest is a stand-in for the more immediate and searing events of Tlatelolco; in this the work is very similar to the dramatic structure created by Arthur Miller in the play *The Crucible*, ostensibly about the events of the 1693 Salem witch trials, but carefully intended to strike a critical analogy against the events of the 1950's McCarthy trials. A comment by Miller is invoked, in fact, in Fuentes' preface to *TLGSP* as one of the stimuli of this drama: Miller apparently told Fuentes he had always been fascinated by the encounter of Moctezuma and Cortés –a man who had everything and a man who had nothing (*Gatos*, 5/1). But the presence of Miller in *TLGSP* is more masked than revealed by this comment; his

true influence lies in the suggestion of a dramatic format, as in *The Crucible*, by which a dramatic and critical analogy is struck between disparate historical events within a particular culture in order to reveal secret or unconscious realities about that history. The example of Miller, and the political thought of Paz, pervade the background of this ritual text from start to finish which is not to say Fuentes has not achieved a striking, original and distinctly Mexican literary image, which I believe he has.

Unlike Miller, Fuentes does not depend on a separate discussion to make clear the images of the present (October 2, 1968) being seen through the palimpsest of the past; his references within the text are explicit. In the climactic chorus of the augurs following the death of Moctezuma in Act 9 we hear:

Chorus - The lament goes forth,
tears fall there in Tlatelolco

Auger 1 - In Tlatelolco Moctezuma
murdered the dreams

Auger 3 - In Tlatelolco Alvarado
murdered the singers.

Auger 4 - Alvarado, red like Tonatiuh,
ordered the entrances closed, trapped
the dancers, then lanced them,
stabbed them, pierced them with swords.

Auger 5 - They all tried to flee,
some scaled the walls, but
they could not save themselves.

Auger 3 - Covered with blood
the old gods fled.

Auger 4- Covered with blood
the new gods arrived.

Auger 1 - Tlatelolco will be
forever the scene of the crime.
(*Gatos*, 170-71; all translations are by the author)

This rhetorical strategy makes it impossible not to see the two bloody occurrences. Alvarado's paranoid butchery of the participants in an Aztec religious festival during Cortés' absence in 1520 and the 1968 attack of Tlatelolco, as ver-

sions of one another. Furthermore, the final scene of the play represents graphically a powerful return of the present, to invert Freud's phrase, when all the central characters return to the stage dressed in modern roles: the Aztec priests as restaurant waiters, soldiers as ranchers, the augurs as policeman, the King of Texcoco as a veteran of the Revolution, the murdered advisor Tzompantecutli as an intellectual, Cuitlahuac as a Mexican General, Father Olmedo as Archbishop of Mexico, the cacique of Cempoala as «a senator or a pistolero,» Cortés' generals as contemporary businessmen, Marina as a hat-check girl, Cortés himself as a U.S. general, and Moctezuma as the President of Mexico. In the final action of the play, a student comes running to the stage, the same young man who had been sacrificed on the altar of Cholula in Act 8. He is shot down by the police and falls dead at the feet of Cortés and Moctezuma, an image of the dead students of '68. Immediately a spotlight falls on the character of Quetzalcóatl and «from above the set falls a rain of dead vultures» (*Gatos*, 187).

What are we to make of this continual and focused reference to pre-Columbian Mexico as an analysis of the motives and methods of the Mexican regime in the tumultuous years of '68-'70, and why does the figure of Quetzalcóatl occupy such a central place in that analysis? I suggest that by examining the sources and use of Fuentes' most dominant pre-Columbian images in the play, especially Quetzalcóatl, we learn that this figure is the mythic image of solidarity with the fallen, the losers in Mexican history from Postclassic times to the present, and of their continually differed expectations of liberty; or in Fuentes' words, «When the future is suppressed, the origin occupies its place.» Quetzalcóatl, therefore, is the figure of a peculiarly Mexican experience of tragedy, «More tragic than Oedipus,» of fallen hopes and deferred expectations, of which Tlatelolco was the most dramatic and recent instance. It should be clear that I am less concerned with the ethnohistorical authenticity of the pre-Columbian iconography of *TLGSP* than in the view of history which inhabits and makes possible this drama as an instance of «critical imagination,» to use Paz's term.

Fuentes has forthrightly expressed on several occasions his rejection of positivist and absolutist models of history in favor of something he calls «the notion of tragedy.»

For the West, the notion of progress replaced the notion of tragedy. With a sense of tragedy the history of the world could be understood as a conflict of equal values: Creon's spirit of order as against Antigone's spirit of freedom. Whatever the outcome, the experience was a lucid one. But once you believe that you are ordered to progress, failure becomes not tragedy but a crime. Those who oppose you are not longer your equals but figures of evil (*Herald-Post*, B-2).

This nostalgic evocation of a Greek tragic vision is appropriate to *TLGSP* in that while the inspiration for the topic and setting may derive from Arthur Miller,

the actual mechanism and dramatic structure of the play is closer to an ancient Greek ritual drama. Acts 3 and 9 make extensive use of a chorus of augurs who also become figures of the gods. The fatality of the events and their outcome is well known to the audience but not to the characters, locked in their mortal combats. The characters themselves are both more and less than individuals. But, of course, none of the gods in *TLGSP* are Greek, and the notion of tragedy Fuentes strives to enact in this play is not Greek finally but, if we cast this term in its complete historical context, Native American, or, more narrowly, Mestizo. If, and I am convinced he does, Fuentes believes the social reality of contemporary Mexico lives and breathes within a history that cannot be altogether reduced to formulas, schemata, dependency models, statistics, or dialectics, then he must simultaneously search among and construct out of the ruins of the pre-Columbian past an image of that notion of tragedy which is distinctly Mexican and indigenous. This is the enduring work of the art of *TLGSP* which transcends the specific, separate occasions of both conquest in 1519-21 and police massacre in October 1968.

The motif of pre-Columbian influence and permanence in *TLGSP* is summed up in the image of the pyramid, which Fuentes echoes directly from the chapter «Critique of the Pyramid» in Paz's *Posdata*. «You have come to a nation constructed like a pyramid,» Marina tells the sleeping Cortés in Act 6.

The land is a pyramid.... The state
also is a pyramid, sustained at its base
by slaves, by the macehuals, the cargo-
carriers, and thousands of nameless men;
then by the ant-like activity of the tax
collectors, the artisans, the merchants
and the masters of professions; followed
by the bravura of the warriors and the secret
vigilance of the priests; farther up by the
pride and privilege of the princes; at
the top is Moctezuma and his is absolute
power.... And a pyramid of the soul
finally and above all (*Gatos*, 97).

It is not in the pyramid, however, but in a romanticized figure of Quetzalcóatl, the «Educator god» as he calls himself, that Fuentes has invested the burden of his indigenist analysis. Fuentes has used three primary Aztec sources for his Quetzalcóatl image. I will examine one of these. Quetzalcóatl first appears as an augur in a chorus and competition of the gods in Act 3. He wears a featureless mask and possesses a giant golden phallus. «I invented man in love and for love,» he says, «in the light and for the light» (*Gatos*, 28); this is freely adapted from a

version of the creation myth found in the Leyenda de los soles ms. of 1558. In *TLGSP* Quetzalcóatl says:

One day I washed my sex, I caressed and played with it; my semen burst forth and fell on the rocks of the earth. The dust quickened and thus were men born; and man, who before did not exist, gave thanks that I had given them life (*Gatos*, 28).

Further, in *TLGSP* Quetzalcóatl is locked in combat for the mind of Moctezuma with the gods Huitzilopochtli (who advises war and sacrifice) and Tezcatlipoca (a clever sorcerer of darkness). The latter wrenches from Quetzalcóatl his giant phallus, which, in the words of the stage directions, «in the back turns into a mirror.» Fuentes then retells the mythic story of the life of Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl, ruler of Tollan, as found in the 1570 *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* ms., which Fuentes would have read in the 1945 translation from the Nahuatl by Primo Velazquez, paragraphs 11-69. If we examine that original, sacred story, from which Fuentes took his principal Quetzalcóatl image, we find the following: First, the vital dates of Topiltzin fit perfectly into one complete 52-year *xiuhmollili* calendar count: born on a day 1 Reed he dies on a day 1 Reed exactly 52 years later. 1 Reed, of course, is also the legendary day-name of the year, 1519, in which Cortes first landed on the Mexican coast, exactly 12 cycles later according to the Cuauhtitlan chronicle. Within this ritual circle of his 52-year life Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl and his Toltecs elaborate their marvelous, ideal existence among abundance of jewels, precious plumes, cotton and cacao. His life is the perfect figure of penitential humility, hidden in solitude, a sign of spiritual self-sufficiency. The figure four occurs repeatedly, always with Quetzalcóatl at the center. Human sacrifice is not permitted in Tollan. The Cuauhtitlan narrator creates in paragraphs 29-38 a kind of *illo tempore* vignette of a perfect society with a perfectly integrated human psyche at the center. None of it ever existed, of course, except in the nostalgic fantasy of the narrator himself. The Cuauhtitlan narrator, through his uses of the quincunx pattern, projects this emotional climate and this symbol complex over the figure of Topiltzin and his perfectly harmonious place in the sun called Tollan. Into this harmony then comes a trinity of sorcerers led by Tezcatlipoca, greedy for sacrifice. And it is a mirror that does the trick and causes the fall of Quetzalcóatl. In this mirror Tezcatlipoca shows Topiltzin his «flesh,» *nacayo*, something which Topiltzin had never heard of and could not conceive. When he saw himself, Topiltzin recoiled in terror and went into confinement. Under the guise of consoling this new-found despair, the sorcerers return with liquor of some sort, get both Quetzalcóatl and his pious sister drunk, after which, the narrator implies but doesn't quite say, they sleep together. With all his penitential commitments destroyed, Topiltzin obviously must

leave the ideal harmony he had created and so sets out, after much lamenting, toward the seacoast, where he redeems himself through self-immolation, recovering his initial purity, and rising into the sky to become the planet Venus.

The original narrator saw these events in the most tragic terms. No other Quetzalcóatl account is so intense and explicit in its description of the spiritual loss felt by the priest-king and his followers. In this «historical» account of his own origins, the Mestizo narrator demonstrates his Nativist vision of all history as a tragedy in which two irreconcilable natures of time struggle with one another. At one time, he believed, time itself was circular, endless, ritualistic, and harmonious, and man's consciousness was analogous, fitting perfectly to the ritual calendar; this time-space was called Tollan. Then consciousness changed, and man came to see himself a creature irrevocably touched by linear irreversibility and dedicated to death, but unable to forget that he once was otherwise. As myth, the narrative of Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl was for the narrator, and I would guess for all true devotees of the Quetzalcóatl cult, the paradigm of a continual tragic tension in his individual consciousness of self between the memory of lost wholeness and the tragic awareness of fragmentation, a tension which he projected into the events of Toltec history.

This is the indigenous story from which Fuentes takes the central Quetzalcóatl images of his play – though one crucial element, the promise of return, is entirely lacking in this original. The mirror motif runs throughout the play, an image of self-recognitions and seduction. When Quetzalcóatl first looks into the mirror in the *TLGSP* version, he says, «When I saw myself, I was terrified, my face was not like that of men. If my creation was divine, then I was a monster; if I was a god, my sons, so different from me, were infernal.» And Tezcatlipoca tells him, «Your face was eternal: identical to the mirror: a space infinitely empty. Identical to my darkness» (*Gatos*, 30). When Quetzalcóatl has fled, fallen and disgraced, Tezcatlipoca comments again,

... To compete his creation and give it meaning, he had
to share it with me, with the night, with dreams, with evil.
... Since then, we reign together over men.

Here is the mythic center of the notion of tragic balance which Fuentes sees as the only proper frame in which to view Mexican history, a notion drawn, as I have indicated, directly and I believe authentically from the mythic materials of pre-Columbian tradition. (The image is drawn directly – how direct the idea itself is, we can't really say. This opens an area of fascinating discussion: Is there really a line of intellectual continuity from preHispanic thought to modern Mexico, or is the use of preHispanic images and iconography a successive series of masks over western ideas?)

When he departs, Quetzalcóatl leaves this parting comment and advice with Moctezuma:

While I am absent, I will be desired ... but one day I will return, I promise, and when I return, dyed in gold by the sun and the sea, I will be able to ask, with the right that is mine for having been both creature and creator, protagonist of both creation and the fall, I will be able to ask: What have you done with the gifts I gave you?

... Clean your kingdom of impurities, Moctezuma; abandon the criminal cult of sacrifice and war; conquer the might, redeem the light; found your power no longer on death, but on my teachings. The earth cannot be conquered by anyone because it belongs to all. (*Gatos*, 33-4).

Moctezuma's response is

How impossible! Serve two antagonistic gods? Huitzilopochtli? Quetzalcóatl? If only they would meld together in one!

But, of course, Fuentes believes, they did not and do not meld into one, and Moctezuma as well as Cortés must choose which advice to follow. That they both choose Huitzilopochtli is foregone, a fatal necessity which the law of tragic balance enunciated by Tezcatlipoca requires. A fall, not happy, not a *felix culpa*, but into an arena of continually contending forces where evil wins and redemption is continually deferred, where the best hope is a balance, a stasis, a standoff of contending powers.

It is Marina, Cortés' legendary mistress and translator, who takes up the vision of Quetzalcóatl and seeks to press it on Cortés as a vision of historical possibility. Hers is the voice of hope, promise, and alternate destinies.

Cortés, Cortés, Cortés ... Your previous face doesn't matter; Mexico has imposed on you the mask of Quetzalcóatl, the god desperately awaited, the principle of creative unity, the educator god, not the murderer god. O Señor, be faithful to this destiny which has accompanied you, silent and invisible, since the

cradle. Be, in reality, the Plumed Serpent. Bring back, in reality, union and happiness to this torn and subjugated people (*Gatos*, 118-9).

But Cortés lies sleeping as she speaks and her voice echoes Cassandra-like into the stage. Her lengthy plea to Cortés after the massacre of Cholula in Act 8 is rejected:

Señor, do not burn, do not kill, do not devastate this land. Tyranny is not overcome with more tyranny. Listen to what I ask with my poor reasons and my bad tongue. Take this land, maintain it ... Moctezuma is the name of a usurpation; long before the Aztecs arrived ... my people dreamed, imagined, built, created... Do not murder the good of my people, in trying to cure its evils. O Señor, take what is constructed here and build by our side; let us learn from your world, learn from ours! Do not murder my country (*Gatos*, 153-4).

And it is to Marina that Fuentes gives the climax of the play, a long embittered outcry of pain as she gives birth to the son of Cortés, «the first Mexican» she calls him.

You will know how to wait and wait and wait as our ancestors awaited the arrival of the god Quetzalcóatl, the god who fled terrified of his own face so that your horrible face, my son, might appear in traces of fog and jade, with a mask of dust and lament. Some day, my son, your waiting will be recompensed and the god of beneficence and happiness will reappear behind a church or a pyramid in the mirror of the vast basin of Mexico. But he will only reappear if beginning now you prepare to reincarnate him yourself, my *hijito de la chingada*; you must be the Plumed Serpent, the earth with wings, the bird of clay, the damned and double-damned son of Mexico and Spain. You are my only legacy, the legacy of Malintzin the goddess, of Marina the whore, of Malinche the mother (*Gatos*, 175).

The sublimated voice which inhabits and makes possible the sublime rhetoric of this impassioned denunciation and desperate hope, is the voice of Fuentes speaking to the survivors and the bereaved of Tlatelolco. A careful study of this speech against pages 148-154 of *Tiempo mexicano*, Fuentes' direct description and response to Tlatelolco, will reveal this relationship.

If fact, the essays of *Tiempo mexicano*, written at or near the same time Fuentes was working on *TLGSP*, are inseparable from the reading of this play. I would even argue that they form a single text. Especially important is the chapter «From Quetzalcóatl to Pepsicóatl» in which Fuentes repeats and analyzes exactly the same Quetzalcóatl myth described above. When he abandoned Mexico, Fuentes asserts in that essay, Quetzalcóatl «sowed in earth the corn, and in the souls of all Mexicans an infinite, circular suspicion.» Examining this narrative as key to the thematics of preHispanic Mexican art, Fuentes notes exactly what I have suggested above in the Quetzalcóatl story: «Its time and space refuse to resolve themselves into a linear illusion. European art transplanted to Mexico is fundamentally lineal.... The meaning of ancient Mexican art consists, precisely, in elaborating an enormous (image of) time and space into which fits not only the implacable circle of the upkeep of the cosmos, but also the circularity of a perpetual return to origins, as well as the circulation of all the mysteries that rationalization cannot accomodate» (*TM*, 18). There is throughout preHispanic art, Fuentes insists, a secret tension between necessity and freedom which European positivist thought will not permit to exist. This tension, which might at first appear only in the myth of the fall of Quetzalcóatl, is in fact pervasive throughout preHispanic art in a double aspect: liberty needs necessity, its opposite, in order to see itself in the face of that absolute other; and liberty, in the face of necessity, is a continually deferred reality in preHispanic art. The history of indigenous Mexico, in other words, «is the history of an absence and a waiting.» A history, Fuentes tells in *TLGSP*, that continues to live in the tragic, probably permanent, tensions between United States interests and Mexican interests, between the self-interests of oligarchies and the common interests of the dispossessed, between the idealism of students and the anger of policemen, between the light of Quetzalcóatl and the dark mirror of Tezcatlipoca.

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